

Mary Divine, *Pioneer Press*

Republican U.S. Rep Michele Bachmann introduced a bill Tuesday that could clear the way for a new bridge south of Stillwater, prompting another Minnesota congresswoman to vow to fight it.

Progress on building a \$668 million, four-lane bridge across the St. Croix River stalled in the fall when the National Park Service - reversing an opinion issued five years ago - said the bridge should not be allowed because the river is protected by the U.S. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Only Congress could counter that decision.

Bachmann's one-page bill calls for construction of the bridge "to be deemed to be consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act."

"It is critical that we move forward in the construction of the (bridge)," Bachmann said. "For too long, lawsuits and other challenges have gotten in the way, only increasing the price tag for the American taxpayer as we work to overcome obstacle after obstacle."

The 6th District congresswoman said she conferred with the House Natural Resources Committee in writing her legislation and anticipates congressional hearings on it.

"I look forward to the National Park Service justifying how the bridge construction was consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 2005, but how it was no longer was consistent in 2010," she said.

Chris Stein, superintendent of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, said Park Service officials cannot comment on proposed legislation. Wisconsin Reps. Sean Duffy, a Republican, and Ron Kind, a Democrat, are co-sponsors.

But U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., criticized Bachmann's bill.

"I will do everything in my power as a member of Congress to defeat any federal legislation that lifts the protection from the Lower St. Croix River Scenic River for a project of this magnitude - not only magnitude in the size of the bridge but in the cost of the bridge," she said.

A coalition of environmental groups and St. Croix River advocates in Minnesota and Wisconsin last week urged Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton to push for a smaller bridge; Dayton responded by saying that "all possibilities have been reopened for consideration."

"Representative Bachmann's bill to exempt the current proposed freeway-style bridge from the federal Wild and Scenic Act is both environmentally and fiscally irresponsible," said Margaret Levin, president of the Sierra Club's North Star chapter.

"It is also unnecessary. A smaller-scale bridge can meet residents' needs while reducing impacts on the St. Croix River."

Rebecca Wodder, president of American Rivers, which named the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway one of "America's Most Endangered Rivers" in 2009, said Bachmann's bill "creates a loophole that strips the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway of its Wild and Scenic River protections."

In addition, Wodder said the legislation would set a dangerous precedent for other federally protected Wild and Scenic rivers nationwide.

The Washington County Board on Tuesday unanimously passed a resolution requesting that the Minnesota and Wisconsin congressional delegations support legislation to exempt the bridge from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The St. Croix County, Wis., board recently passed a similar resolution.

"The price goes up \$2 (million) to \$4 million every month it's delayed," said Washington County Commissioner Gary Kriesel.

He said the construction project would also "put hundreds of people to work."

Stillwater officials last month began exploring whether the city could sue to close the Stillwater Lift Bridge on the grounds that it is unsafe and violates the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Mayor Ken Harycki said the volume of traffic on the bridge is greater than what was permitted when the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed for the lower section of the river in 1973.

But members of the Stillwater City Council on Tuesday night decided to postpone pursuing the legal action "to see what the effect of the national legislation would be," Harycki said.

"We'll let the legislative process play out in Washington and hope that, at long last, we'll have a solution to the new St. Croix River crossing," he said.

Harycki also said that pursuing a smaller bridge would delay the project even more because of all the legal agreements involved.

"We went through a very lengthy and detailed stakeholder process lasting many years, and all these alternatives were looked at and ultimately rejected," he said. "We've done the analysis. Really, at this point, to go back and do the analysis again is adding further delays to the project.

"Furthermore, we're placing the bridge next to a sewage treatment plant and the smokestack of the Allen S. King plant. Anyone who wants to call that Wild and Scenic, I would really question their judgment."

No mention of funding is made in Bachmann's bill. The congresswoman, who has criticized federal earmarks, said she "wanted to ensure the bill could not, in any way, be construed as an earmark."

But McCollum questioned where the construction money would be found.

"Where is this money coming from in this time of fiscal belt tightening?" she asked. "... The governor of Wisconsin says he's broke; the Republicans in Minnesota say they're broke; and we're having fiscal challenges here at the federal level."

Minnesota Department of Transportation officials had hoped to start building the \$668.5 million bridge in July 2013.

It would replace the aging Stillwater Lift Bridge as the main Minnesota-Wisconsin crossing north of Interstate 94 and divert thousands of daily commuters from Stillwater's historic downtown, routing them instead to Minnesota 36 through Oak Park Heights.

Groups have battled for more than 20 years over whether, and how, a bridge should be built.

Bachmann introduced a similar bill a year ago, but it had no co-sponsors and no action was taken.